

# Has Sarah Palin Really Shaken Up the Race?

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Posted: September 12, 2008 06:41 AM

In the last few weeks the Republican Party has gone back to its base by nominating a right-wing extremist with reactionary views on a range of social policies. They have sought to represent John McCain, of all people, as an agent of change in Washington, tried to build an appeal to voters based on the notion that they are the regular Americans and the Democrats are out of touch elitists, accused Senator Obama of being a sexist for using a common figure of speech and more or less lied about their records and that of their opponents.

It is almost as if we are in the middle of a close election campaign and both sides are doing whatever they can to win, even if that means pushing the boundaries of ethics, decency and honesty. The Republican attacks and tactics of the last weeks should surprise nobody who has been paying attention the last eight years. The details might be a little unusual or more colorful, but the themes and nastiness should have been, and was, expected.

A few months ago, I wrote on this website, in a piece entitled "Not Getting Late Early Enough" that the problem Obama faced was that his lead was small and McCain, as was true back then, was running a lackluster campaign. My concern was that Democrats could not count on McCain to continue to run a poor campaign and if something were to go right for McCain, it would erase Obama's slight lead.

Well, something, albeit in the implausible and frightening form of Sarah Palin, has gone right for John McCain. She has reenergized the base of the party, made McCain into a better campaigner and given the election another narrative other than the failed Republican policies of the last eight years. Now, with less than two months to go, the race has become very close.

For John McCain, the timing on this was good. He needed to bring some life to a campaign that a month ago looked increasingly similar to Bob Dole's 1996 White House bid. Palin made the only real convention news of the year, introduced badly needed new blood into the Republican Party and excited the social conservative base in the nick of time.

For Obama's campaign, the challenge will be to determine whether Palin is a real game changer or just a two or three week story that will soon get swallowed up by trivialities like the state of the economy, the war in Iraq or the mortgage crisis. Good arguments can be made for either of these scenarios, but it is hard to know for certain with the only partial information to which most of us has access. If Palin is a real game changer, the Obama campaign will have to adapt, be willing to take on greater risks and perhaps present a more aggressive, even angry, campaign. If, however, Palin is only a brief infatuation which brings only temporary excitement to a long campaign, Obama would not be well served by such a strategy, so assessing the potential enduring impact of Palin correctly is absolutely critical for Obamas's campaign.

The last few weeks have shaken up the political race, but perhaps not as much as we might think. In mid-August the polls showed the race with Obama slightly ahead, but occasionally within the margin of error. This week, most of the polls show the race essentially deadlocked, but with some polls showing McCain ahead and a few still showing Obama ahead. In most cases the polls are still within the margin of error. Palin's presence has moved the numbers, but not all that much, and perhaps not for all that long.

Additionally, we are now at the point when state level information and data about demographic groups within each key state really begin to matter. The big picture narrative matters, but less than one would think given the flood of attention to Sarah Palin. The kinds of questions we need to ask now are things like: what states does Palin put into play if she can really bring out the Christian right vote, can Ed Koch really move enough older Jewish voters in Florida to help Obama, are female supporters of Palin in key states people who would otherwise support the Democrats, what are the two or three things about Palin that will move her new fans back to Obama-and their senses. There are many more, but without knowing the answers, it is difficult to know what is the best move for Obama.

Obama has to combine the lessons of the past about what happens if this goes unanswered with the dynamics of this particular campaign. This approach requires a great deal of discipline from a campaign. Fortunately, Obama has proven himself to be a very disciplined candidate so far. The challenge for his campaign will be to get it right and then stick with that approach even as pressure to do something different gets more intense.